



9-1-1987

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### Recommended Citation

Gray, Mary A. (1987) "Diamond in the Rough: The Phenomenon of the Outstanding Preservice Teacher," *Journal of Teaching and Learning*: Vol. 2 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

Available at: <https://commons.und.edu/tl-journal/vol2/iss1/4>

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# Diamond-in-the-Rough: The Phenomenon of the Outstanding Preservice Teacher

by  
Mary Ann Gray

*"...every now  
and then there  
comes an  
outstanding teacher  
— a gem..."*

In teaching, as in every profession, there are those that are good at what they do and those that are not quite as effective. So called "good" teachers exist in just about every school building and are not too difficult to locate, depending on the looseness of one's interpretation of the term. But every now and then there comes an outstanding teacher--a gem--who, however hard to define, noticeably shines and vibrates alongside of his or her peers. From where did these master teachers spring? While I recognized that many may have developed their transcendent capabilities "on the job," I hypothesized that they probably were already exhibiting them during their own preservice educational experiences. This paper explores the qualities of the outstanding preservice teacher, the forerunners of these "masters of their craft."

The creation of this thesis actually began months before any written word was ever set to paper. As one of the responsibilities of being a university graduate assistant during the time that I was completing my doctoral studies, I was assigned twelve student teachers to supervise. It wasn't very long into the semester before my attention was repeatedly claimed by two of them, a male and a female, who, in my estimation, so outshone their classmates that they rendered them virtually invisible. I attempted to define these two in behavioristic terms: they were creative, eager, dynamic. It wasn't enough. The words didn't express the students' very essence; I needed to gain a sense of what they were all about, what made them "tick." I sought to understand how these two individuals approached life, schooling and their future profession.

The interviews that I subsequently conducted with them were an attempt to do just that. Because my general purpose was to find out how these two students

viewed life in and outside of the classroom, questions focused on their educational backgrounds, critical moments in their schooling, their philosophies of education, the student teaching experience (including the professional method courses) and their future plans.

As the two students, who will now be referred to as Deb and Todd, responded to the questions their answers seemed to contain four recurrent themes or shared structures that overshadowed the questions themselves and which, when viewed as a whole, began to construct a picture of what an outstanding preservice teacher is. Four labels were sought to categorize each theme. These are agency, liberation, receptivity/plasticity and aliveness. Each theme will be treated separately in the sections to follow. The last section of this paper will reflect upon these interviews and offer further questions for investigation.

*"...agency,  
liberation,  
receptivity/  
plasticity and  
aliveness..."*

### Agency

The sense of agency that both of these students exhibited was the easiest to detect because it was the most anticipated. Agency, in the sense that it is being used in this paper, refers to the need to take charge and to do. Deb and Todd both placed high values on action, as is reflected in the following musing of Deb:

*You get out of education what you put into it...  
You have to make this mean something to you so you  
can incorporate it and let it change you, if that's  
what it's going to do.*

But action for action sake is not enough. Both students emphasized the need for direction.

*You have to know where you're going...You have  
to take yourself seriously and really think about  
what you're doing.*

Deb repeatedly stated throughout the interview that goal-setting--deciding what you want and then systematically going after it--is extremely important:

*(I told the kids) if they want something to happen,  
they have to make it happen.*

Todd expressed a similar attitude when he discussed his plans for the first months in the profession:

*I want to spend the next two years really working  
on my craft and my skills and getting better and  
better at it.*

Bakan (1966) refers to agency as separateness, as ignoring the communal world that one lives in and going after one's wants in spite of everyone else. These two students, while they were indeed goal-setters, fairly pragmatic and very independent, were also cognizant of the effect of their actions upon others. Deb expressed eagerness to work so she would no longer be a financial burden on her family; she was "sick of being a mooch." Likewise, Todd confided that, as tempting as it was to consider living at home during the first years of teaching in order to save money, he would probably not do so. The need to grow away from his family and gain economic independence was more important to him.

This sense of agency, peppered with occasional reflection and thoughtfulness, permeated the conversations. Putting thoughts into action was a value high on the list for these two students.

### Liberation

Throughout the interviews, a strong sense of education as a means to freedom repeatedly emerged. Both Deb and Todd expressed firm conviction that schooling had the potential to be this liberating force. Surprisingly, though, it was at this juncture that the two parted company because, while Todd viewed education as the means of liberation for the individual, Deb took the stance that education was to be used for the liberation of the society.

Todd's belief is undoubtedly the more common one to hold in the United States, a relatively free and wealthy nation where the image of the individual pioneer is still a strong and alluring one and individual rights are constitutionally protected above the rights of the society. This educational goal of individual growth is reflected in the following statement by Todd:

*I think the kids ought to be able to grow. They ought to expand. My job as a teacher is to help them. They should know themselves...and that would include who they are, what hurts them, what makes them laugh, what makes them happy, what makes them shy, where they want to go.*

Todd's goals stop within the confines of his four classroom walls; indeed, within the confines of the individual.

Deb, on the other hand, yearns to reshape the entire planet:



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- Greene, M. (1971). Curriculum and consciousness. Teachers' College Record, 73, 253-269.

## Hawthorne

Now, this first week in June  
on this Northwest campus,  
three thousand miles  
from your New England,  
all the leaves are green.

On one tree  
clusters of five or six  
tiny roses cover the branches,  
almost cover the leaves,  
a dark-rose blanket on the leafy dome.

Beneath those bouquets  
sprawls a student,  
pulls from his pack  
Twice-Told Tales,  
reads among the blossoms  
of the Flowering Hawthorne.

--Pat Rigg